

Extensive Reading: A Graded Reader Approach

Jennifer Yphantides
Christopher Gallagher
English for Liberal Arts Program
International Christian University

This paper reports on the introduction and implementation of an Extensive Reading (ER) program in Stream 4 of the English for Liberal Arts (ELA) course. The program was piloted in the Spring term of the 2014 Academic Year during the Reading and Writing (R&W1) class: a supplemental class for the Academic Reading and Writing course (ARW), one of the main academic courses taken by all students in the ELA. This report provides a background to the implementation of the ER program, including a rationale, a review of ER literature, and an overview of the approach taken. It summarizes quantitative and qualitative data collected from both teachers and students during the pilot project. It concludes with suggestions for future program implementation.

Background to the Pilot Program

At the beginning of the academic year, students were introduced to the ER pilot program. This introduction consisted of three parts. First, the students completed a worksheet in groups (Appendix 1). This worksheet served to highlight the different qualities and purposes of intensive reading (done in the ARW class) and extensive reading (done in the R&W1 class). Second, for the subsequent two classes, students practiced writing book reports that followed a standard format (Appendix 2a/b) including a summary, a reaction, and discussion questions. During this two-week period, students wrote two book reports after reading the same short stories and then conducted an in-class book discussion. Third, students were taken to the library so they could see where the graded readers were housed and they were instructed on how they might best choose one book per week based on their level and their interest. For the remaining seven weeks of the term, the students read one graded reader per week and completed a book report for each that was submitted to the teacher to check for compliance. In addition, students conducted book discussions in class for approximately 45 minutes per week during the R&W1 class.

The Benefits of Extensive Reading

Perhaps the most significant driving force behind the ER pilot program was the lack of comprehensible input provided to stream four students during their tenure in the ELA. In the core ARW course, students complete a number of relatively difficult texts on a variety of topics to prepare them for the reading they will encounter when they progress through the College of Liberal Arts (CLA) and declare a major. When they approach this material, students are taught to employ particular reading strategies. However, Stream 4 students have been placed into their level precisely because they need more support and more input at a

A Graded Reader Approach

graded level than students in other streams. According to hypothesis five of Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition, learners improve at a faster rate when they receive input that is one step beyond their current stage, or $i+1$, of linguistic competence (1982). Teachers chose to implement the pilot program in the hopes of providing students with input at the $i+1$ level in order to support and facilitate their language acquisition.

In addition to providing comprehensible input, ER can also lead to gains in students' writing. Stotsky (1983) and Krashen (1984) studied the link between ER and improved writing in L1 populations. Later, L2 studies by Hafiz & Tudor (1989) in the UK and in Pakistan, Robb & Susser (1989) in Japan, and Al Mansour (2014) in Saudi Arabia found significant improvement in students' writing skills. It is presumed that these benefits are reaped because students are exposed to large amounts of comprehensible input that transfers intuitively to other skill areas such as writing.

Another benefit of ER is the improvement in students' vocabulary. Horst (2005) has also compared the rate at which students acquire vocabulary. According to her study, learners who read extensively improved their vocabulary at a faster rate than those who used more traditional means such as memorization from lists. ER also had the ancillary benefit of helping students to review the vocabulary they already know and demonstrating to them how words can be used in different contexts.

In addition to improving writing and vocabulary, ER also enhances students' ability to participate in class discussions (Baker, 2007). Although we are teaching students about reading and writing in our courses, they are expected to spend the majority of their time in class discussing what they have read. Baker (2007) hypothesizes that:

There are so many factors that make ER book discussions successful activities From a qualitative perspective however, this activity mirrors what we do naturally after reading a book: discuss it, recommend it, laugh about it, feel good about it and share it as a social activity. It is authentic language use.

Perhaps the most important benefit of ER, however, is the confidence it instills in students. Stream 4 learners in the ELA often suffer from feelings of inadequacy. However, requiring them to complete one assignment per week that is less demanding than the homework they usually receive in the ARW class, and being able to easily and enjoyably complete that assignment, builds their confidence and their motivation. This has been found by other researchers as well, including Mutoh, Bamford, and Helgesen (1998).

Data Collection and Interpretation

To gather student feedback on the pilot program, teachers conducted a survey that included both quantitative and qualitative elements. Full details of the survey results can be found by correlating the results in Table 1. below, with the corresponding ten questions in Appendix 3.

A Graded Reader Approach

Results

Table 1. Survey Results Stream 4, R & W, Spring 2014: Graded Readers Feedback

%	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	1%	2%	2%	3%	2%	2%	3%	0%	2%	4%
2	9%	2%	2%	2%	16%	8%	2%	9%	6%	7%
3	16%	21%	19%	23%	38%	18%	8%	38%	24%	24%
4	40%	48%	33%	43%	29%	38%	44%	35%	34%	39%
5	32%	25%	42%	26%	14%	31%	42%	17%	31%	22%

1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Not sure; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

In terms of this quantitative data, there are certain salient points that merit mention. First, a significant majority of students reported that they found the graded reading material to be “very interesting” (72%). Part of the purpose of any ER program is to have students develop a deeper motivation to read because of being able to choose their own books, and this seems to be confirmed by this result. Second, one of the goals of incoming Stream 4 ARW students is to increase their reading speed. By definition, the reading of intensive texts does not facilitate this goal. However, a large majority of students (73%) reported that they felt completing one graded reader per week helped them to become more fluent readers and this had a spill-over effect on their reading of intensive texts. Third, the majority of students reported that writing weekly book reports, while taxing in terms of time, helped them improve their summarizing skills and their overall writing fluency. Finally, almost 90 percent of students said that the ER program facilitated their capability to take part in class discussions. This finding is of particular significance because much of the ARW program is based on class discussion of the core readings. Since the reading material in the ELA reader is often of a very abstract and sophisticated nature, it usually represents a difficult starting point for discussion, especially for Stream 4 students who typically lack the spoken fluency of students in other streams. Because of the weekly discussions of easier material that students could readily make personal connections with, students were able to develop their discussion skills and increase their confidence in their ability to participate in class discussions. Again, it was observed that this had a spill-over effect on their performance in ARW classes, as mentioned in the teachers’ comments below.

The qualitative data adds a richer picture to the numbers given here, but with over 100 respondents it is not possible to include it all. There were a number of recurrent themes in the students’ comments on the ER program and one that stands out clearly was their enjoyment of reading. The following four comments are representative:

I have not ever read the novel book written in English, so the Graded Reader is very stimulating for me. It teaches me the charm of reading. I want to read English books more and more.

A Graded Reader Approach

I enjoyed reading books and discussing the stories with other people. It is difficult to explain stories and what I felt after I read the books, but I think my skill to explain them improved little by little. Moreover, thank for Graded Reader, I can start reading an English book without hesitation. I know reading English books is fun, so I want to read more English books...

The books that I chose by myself were very exciting (sometimes a little difficult...) And due to this experience, I want to read more books and watch movies in English. I enjoyed reading English book. This class was the most interesting class in the ELA for me.

Other themes in students comments were: being satisfied by the prospect of choosing their own reading material, improvements in expressing their opinions, and making recommendations to other students. They also reported that the writing assignments helped them to understand the themes of some of the classic works of English literature. Some notable examples of these kinds of comments are:

I can enjoy listening to other people's opinion about what the book really wanted to say.

It was hard for me to summarize the book because to do that, I have to understand the main topic or the key point of the book exactly.

The good point of book discussion is that it gave me opportunity to explain the story using my own words.

Book discussion has the good points which we can explain our idea and listen to other's idea. Also we get the skill to change the words in order to be easy for listener to understand.

Good thing is that I have a chance to read O. Henry's story in English. I like his books very much, so I have wanted to read it without translation.

Also, I could read famous stories in English. I could understand the worth of these old stories. Talking about famous stories was easy to talk, so I could enjoy to discuss.

Another important point students made in their comments was that the ER program increased their confidence in their reading and writing ability. Here are a few pertinent examples:

A book report is a good thing because I can know my advancement of learning. For the first time, it took a lot of time to write it, but now I can write it more faster and easier. It's not easy to write. However it makes me good English reader.

Through this book report, I feel that my summary skill was brushed up... my final aim is that I can read long sentences with summarizing in my mind. If I can do it, I can read and understand more quickly.

A Graded Reader Approach

I think graded reader has two good for me. One is we can become to read more quickly. My reading speed was very slow, but now I become to read these books shorter time than before. The other is we can have to think of ourselves. I often feel difficult to connect me and book story.

I'm not good at reading English book, and sometimes feel sleepy when I read difficult book. However, I make myself read one English book per week for this class, so it's really nice practice for get used to reading English books. In addition, I can read book which is not too difficult, so I enjoy reading English book. Also, writing summary and personal connection is good because task which we summarize something and say our own opinions is important studying from now on.

I have confidence with getting better at writing book report. The words come out smoothly than before, and talking skill improved thought discussion.

This is a particularly significant finding because Stream 4 students often report feeling stressed during the first semester of ARW. Many of them were the top students in English class in high school and when they enter ICU, they often report feeling inadequate when they compare themselves to other students. This feeling of inadequacy, coupled with a challenging intensive reading text often places a certain amount of stress on students and, as a result, shapes their class performance in a negative manner. The ER program, according to student comments on the survey, seems to have remedied part of this problem by giving students a regular task that they could complete with relative ease and confidence.

Teacher Comments/Feedback

Stream 4 teachers were uniformly enthusiastic about the introduction of the ER program. It was noted by one teacher that students were initially daunted when they heard that they had to read one book per week, but she also mentioned that, “after the training period, they became adjusted to the routine”. In keeping with student feedback and comments on the survey, teachers confirmed that lively class discussions took place each week and the majority of students wrote lengthy reports of each book they read, which were of a very high standard. Teachers felt that because students had to identify main themes, they were better prepared for choosing essay topics based on the main ideas expressed in the articles of the ELA Reader. In addition, teachers felt that students writing (both fluency and accuracy) had improved over the course of the semester due to the increased practice they were getting with their weekly book reports. Finally, teachers felt that students’ motivation to read and enjoyment of reading increased because they were given the opportunity to make personal connections with the books they read and to lead discussions on the themes. All three teachers agreed that the volume of text the students read during this term far surpassed what they would have read if Stream 4 students were assigned one novel to read in the Spring term.

Conclusion

As described above, this pilot program, using graded readers for the purpose of exposing students to the benefits of extensive reading has been, for the most part, very successful. It has

A Graded Reader Approach

had a significant impact in all of the areas that it was hoped it would support the ARW course, and has been met favorably by both students and teachers. It has also provided the Stream 4 students with a sustained introduction to literature and prepared them for the Summer Extensive Reading Assignment that follows the Spring term. However, one of the main limitations of the ER program has been resources. It will be essential, if the program is to continue, and to achieve even greater success, for more graded readers to be ordered and placed in the library. Also, students would likely benefit from better instruction on how to choose books and how to decide what is an appropriate level, since each publisher has a different method of indicating the level of their material. It is our recommendation that the ER program be continued and further developed in order to provide students with the excellent learning potential that exists in the simple act of reading stories.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Audrey Morrell, and Masuko Mihara, for their assistance in providing input and feedback on R&W1, and helping with the collection of data, which was invaluable for us in writing this report.

References

- Al-Mansour, N. (2014). The effect on an extensive reading program on the writing performance of Saudi EFL university students. *International Journal of Linguistics*. Vol. 6 No. 2.
- Baker, T. (2007). Developing oral proficiency through extensive reading. *Journal of Education and Development*. Issue 22.
- Hafiz, F. M., & Tudor, I. (1989). Extensive reading and the development of language skills. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 43, 4-13.
- Horst, M. (2005). Learning L2 vocabulary through extensive reading: A measurement study. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 16, 355-382.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Krashen, S. D. (1984). *Writing: Research, Theory and Applications*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Robb, T. N., & Susser, B. (1989). Extensive Reading vs Skills Building in an EFL context. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 5/2, 239-249.
- Mutoh, N., Bamford, J., & Helgesen, M. (1998). Handout from the Extensive Reading Forum JALT Omiya, Japan.
- Stotsky, S. (1983). Research on reading/writing relationships: A synthesis and suggested directions. *Language Arts*, 60, 627-642.

A Graded Reader Approach

Appendix 1

Two Kinds of Reading

In the Spring Semester of ARW and R&W, students will complete two kinds of reading assignments that will help them accomplish different language/content learning goals. First, they will do intensive readings from the ARW textbook. Second, they will do extensive readings using readers from the library during R&W. Look at the phrases below that describe intensive and extensive reading. Put the phrases into the category boxes below.

-slower reading	-faster reading
-higher level vocabulary	-lower level vocabulary
-reading for pleasure	-reading for information
-easy to understand	-difficult to understand
-reading for deep understanding	-reading for general understanding
-reading to review vocabulary	-reading to learn new vocabulary

ELA Reader/Intensive Reading	Graded Readers/Extensive Reading

The purposes of the graded reader component of the course are the following.

1. To improve students' reading fluency.
2. To motivate students by giving them a sense of accomplishment in reading.
3. To give students an opportunity to discuss their ideas about literature in class.
4. To provide students with a platform for literature appreciation.
5. To prepare students for their summer homework assignment.

Appendix 2a

Weekly Book Report Form

Title of Book:

Number of Pages:

Summary of Your Book:

Personal Connection to Your Book:

Discussion Questions Based on the Theme of Your Book

1.

2.

Appendix 2b

Each week, students will write a short book report on the reader they have completed. Then, they will come to class with the reader and the report. In small groups, students will conduct book discussions together and make reading recommendations to each other.

Please keep the following things in mind when you write up your book report and prepare for your book discussion.

1. Your summary of the book should be short, concise and in the form of a paragraph. You are not meant to read it out in class. When you write it, you are supposed to be reviewing the contents of your book and mentally preparing to give an oral summary in class.
2. The connections you make to the book should be personal and specific. They should answer the questions
 - a. How are the themes of this book connected to my life?
 - b. How can I apply the lessons of this book to my life?
3. Your discussion questions should be on the general themes of the book and of interest to even though the members of your discussion group probably will not have read your book.

Examples of Good Discussion Questions

1. In the book, a teen-aged child has a serious disagreement with her parents about university. Have you ever had a disagreement with your parents? What was it about and how did you solve it?
2. In the book, the author suggests that she believes in life after death. What do you think happens after death and why?

Examples of Poor Discussion Questions

1. There are ghosts in my book. Do you think ghosts exist?
2. Have you ever had a pet?

These are poor questions because they are yes/no questions and there is no follow-up discussion point.

Appendix 3

Stream 4, R & W, Spring 2014:
Graded Readers Feedback

We hope you enjoyed the selection of Graded Readers in R & W class. In order to improve this course, we would appreciate your feedback. Please rate the Graded Readers according to the following scale: (circle one number for each question)

1 = *Strongly disagree*; **2** = *Disagree*; **3** = *Not sure*; **4** = *Agree*; **5** = *Strongly Agree*

1. The Graded Readers were very interesting to me.
2. The Graded Readers helped me to read more quickly.
3. The G.R. helped me to be able to summarize a story.
4. The G.R. helped me to determine what the themes are in a story.
5. My vocabulary improved because of the Graded Readers.
6. The Graded Readers helped me to write more.
7. The Graded Readers helped me to participate in discussions.
8. I have more confidence using English because of the G.R.
9. The Graded Readers have motivated me to read more in English.
10. I feel prepared now to do my summer reading because of the G.R.

Comments (in Japanese or English):